

House Bill 370

April 7, 2011

Presented by Chas Van Genderen
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Chas Van Genderen, Parks Division Administrator for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here in support of House Bill 370.

This bill touches on a number of issues the legislature is dealing with right now. This is an important bill. Every bill State Parks is working on this session is about improving the value, the system, and the service to customers.

HB370 is about deciding how much we will pay for the things we value. State Parks represent good government that works for people using an optional fee that other states are trying to mimic. This system works and people value it. I know that because in 2009, at the peak of the recession, visitation to Montana State Parks was at an all time high. According to the Bureau of Business and Economic Research survey, visitation by Montana residents has grown 78% since 2002. In reality, when times are tough, we spend time with our families in places that are important to us – in State Parks.

So this bill is aligned with legislative priorities – families, jobs, economy. Consider the survey that shows customer satisfaction in parks is at about 94%. That same survey shows that non-resident spending associated with state parks was over \$122 million and produced 1,600 Montana jobs – not employees but jobs.

This bill is about seeking solutions to parks funding when few others are available. This is an issue the Legislative Finance Committee has heard about for the last two years and was reported on in June of 2009. State Parks gets no general fund revenues and zero hunting and fishing license account monies the rest of the agency is funded with. So the vehicle registration is how Montana has chosen to fund State Parks – and it is working with about 77% participation and an honor system that allows free day use.

We are working to make your state park system on par with other surrounding states. Consider that Montana has the best outdoor resources in the lower 48 but one of the least mature state park systems in the entire nation. We are actively working to improve services and systems and this bill would help address that for the benefit of our citizens, our heritage, and our tourism economy.

It may be difficult to look at FWP and see that state parks are different and they need additional support. But they are. And they do. Two separate studies have shown this. And we are still working to make the appropriate changes in the system.

HB370 is an optional, inexpensive approach to funding a state agency. For less than the price of a single movie ticket, a family can go to state parks for an entire day throughout the year. That is a bargain price for a priceless park system.

In 1936 as America was climbing out of the great depression, Montanan's found it important to make an investment and create the first state park in Lewis and Clark Caverns. Today, as we climb out of the great recession, we can do the same and pass HB370.